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## **Sustaining Cross-Sector Collaboration: An examination of schools involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme**

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# Sustaining Cross-Sector Collaboration:

An examination of schools involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme

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## Executive Summary

The aim of this study is to ascertain if schools involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme [SEP] (2007-2010) were able sustain cross-sectoral collaboration after the funding period. The study is small scale and based on the perspectives of five SEP1 Coordinators whose role it was to oversee the implementation of the project in their school. Three of the five partnerships involved a cross-sector collaboration of primary and post primary schools and two partnerships were solely post-primary. Coordinators ranged from Principals, vice-principals, heads of department and subject teachers. The concluding sections of this report aim demonstrate that many of the partnerships appear to have developed mature collaborations capable of sustaining themselves in some form. Clearly each of the partnerships in their various forms is reliant on external funding to sustain collaborative activities. Participants highlighted that the quantity and quality of collaborative activity could not be sustained. Many of the participants however emphasised that they wanted to sustain cross-sector partnerships and even if the quality and quantity were affected, schools had developed strong institutional relationships with one another which spurred schools on to explore ways in which they could sustain collaborative activity within their current budgets.

### *Logistical challenges of cross-sector collaboration*

All five SEP1 schools identified a range of logistical issues or challenges that they encountered during cross-sector collaboration. Timetabling, transport and travel time between schools were some of the most prevalent challenges. SEP Coordinators described adjusting to the challenge of finding space in their school timetable to undertake shared learning, or raised concerns about students having to be off timetable to travel to their partner school. Most of these concerns in the second and third year of the programme were less problematic. Adjusting to their partner's school ethos and cultural practice was also challenging but identified as an important element of the programme in terms exposing students to different cultural backgrounds. Two of the partnerships in this study are situated within cities, both of which exist in communities that may be described as contested spaces, where there

may be a higher proportion of interface areas, religious segregation and historically higher incidences of sectarianism and or community tensions. According to one of the Coordinators, events in the community such as sectarian instability or key points throughout the year, such as the marching season or elections, tend to impact on schools and need to be carefully managed. The Coordinator in the other school highlighted that gaining the support and involvement of parents in contested space was a challenge, and suggested that some parents continue to deal with the legacy of the conflict and as a result, may be reluctant themselves, to move through contested space, to visit partner schools or are reluctant to let their children visit schools on the *other side* of the community.

### *Sustainability and the willingness to collaborate*

The experience of sharing and cross-sector collaboration was a positive one and was something that schools wanted to sustain. In all cases, there remained some form of collaboration between schools; although some partnerships have maintained much higher levels of collaboration than others. Crucially the process of collaboration has created sustainable institutional relationships after funding; in the form of sustained personal and professional relationships between teachers and in some cases sustained contact at managerial and Governor levels. In some cases, schools were able to maintain some shared classes and in other cases, collaborative projects evolved to a point where a number of schools have sought alternative funding to sustain shared learning and partnership. One partnership was perhaps the epitome of sustainability and has evolved to a point where it has broadened to include other primary and post-primary schools and as a partnership, secured significant additional funds to sustain collaboration in an area of Northern Ireland defined as contested space.

### *The benefits of cross-sector collaboration*

Based on the perspectives of each of the Coordinators, cross-sector collaboration produced a wide variety benefits for pupils, teachers, schools and their respective communities. Pupils benefited from: learning about different cultural and religious practice; an enhanced curriculum; varied teaching methodologies and grew in confidence. Teachers benefitted in terms of developing personal and professional relationships. Schools benefited because they were able to share resources, space

and teachers; they were also able to broaden curricular choice and crucially developed sustainable institutional links. The community also benefits from shared education. In some cases this may be because pupils are moving through contested space or in other cases, pupils from different cultural backgrounds are mixing and learning together over sustained periods. In some cases the community benefits because adults such as parents and teachers are also being exposed to different cultural and religious practice.

*What constitutes best practice and collaborative maturity?*

Section 7 of this report is based on participants' reflections of programme implementation between 2007 and 2010, in which they were asked to talk about what constitutes best practice. Reflections are based on actual practice but also recommendations and aspirations of what could constitute best practice. An effective and mature model of cross-sector collaboration requires a number of ingredients. Some of the participants identified that the SEP model was flexible and organic. The model was not overly proscriptive and Coordinators appreciated room to adjust the programme to suit the local context of schools. An effective model needed institutional buy in and thus the support of teachers, managers and Governors but also parents. Many of the Coordinators highlighted that relationship building between institutions at managerial and teacher level was essential for effective practice and crucially, sustainability. Ideally a good model of collaborative practice is broad and involves both primary and post primary schools and has strong links to the community. The latter stages of section 7 use participants' reflections on best practice and logistical challenge to create a model demonstrating progression towards what constitutes as collaborative maturity or effectiveness.

## Introduction

The education system in Northern Ireland is influenced strongly by an historical commitment to denominationalism and a legacy of political division. For the most part, Protestant and Catholic children are not educated together. While a sector of religiously integrated schools has developed since 1981, currently educating about 7 % of all pupils, the remainder of the system can be broadly divided into schools where young people are educated alongside others of the same religious tradition. Given the context of political violence, it is hardly surprising that there has been a long-standing debate on the potential consequences of separate schools and the role education can play in mitigating social and religious differences. The primary contention, highlighted most recently by Hughes (2010), is whether separate schools in Northern Ireland exacerbate religious and political divisions, or reflect a positive commitment to pluralism.

A number of commentators (Gallagher, 2004; Gallagher 2005) have argued that education has now taken a prominent position as a core component in the reconstruction of post-conflict and post-genocide societies as well as underpinning economic stability and reconciliation (Hayes and McAllister, 2009). As a direct result of ethnic conflict, a number of educational initiatives in Northern Ireland have attempted to mitigate the impact of ethnic division and improve community relations. Until recently the three main approaches have included (i) contact programmes, (including: Education for Mutual Understanding [EMU], Cultural Heritage and the Cross Contact Scheme) (ii) curricular initiatives, (including the introduction of local and global citizenship and common history and religious curriculum) and (iii) attempts to create an entirely new sector based on religiously integrated schools. Research, however has demonstrated limited impact. (Gallagher, 2004; Arlow, 2004; Smith & Robinson, 1996).

In consequence, a new approach developed, based on a critique of the limitations of previous initiatives (Gallagher, 2004), deeper research into the dynamics and possibilities of contact (Hughes et al. 2010) and a consideration of ideas from social network analysis and the reconceptualisation of schools as part of an interdependent network (Gallagher, 2010a, 2010b; Gallagher and Carlisle, 2009). The new

approach, termed shared education, highlighted the idea of promoting positive interdependence between schools as a means of transforming the relationship between otherwise divided institutions and, more important, pupils, teachers, parents and the wider community. More specifically, SEP was based on the idea that rather than challenging institutional boundaries, these boundaries should be left in place, but made less important: in other words, the project sought to challenge the potentially divisive effects of silos by finding practical ways of making institutional boundaries more porous and developing interactive bridges between otherwise separate institutions. These ideas were operationalised in the Sharing Education Programme [SEP] which promotes sharing and collaboration between schools, in order that pupils from different schools can learn together in regular and sustained shared classes, and where schools and teachers can share resources, expertise to develop sustainable institutional relationships. A core element of SEP involves creating cross-sector collaborative networks of schools which offer shared learning experiences for pupils in core curricular areas. In doing so SEP is committed to enhancing pupils' educational opportunities, but also demonstrating how resources between schools can be shared and used more effectively (this is important given the intentions of Department for Education for Northern Ireland to rationalise the school estate<sup>1</sup>). Most importantly, it also provides opportunities to address denominational and cultural issues which will emerge from the relationships that pupils and staff develop through shared learning.

SEP has been supported by funding of over £7m from the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies, in addition to funding for a series of parallel research and advocacy activities.

There have been two phases of the programme, from 2007 to 2010 [SEP1] and from 2010 to 2013 [SEP2]. SEP1 involved 12 partnerships comprising 65 primary and post-primary schools. By the third year of SEP1 almost 3,500 pupils were involved in a little under 3,000 routine shared classes. SEP2 involves 12 partnerships made up of 72 primary and post-primary schools. After one year of SEP2, over 5,000 pupils have engaged in over 3,000 shared classes.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/area-planning/viability-audit-terms-of-reference.htm>



A series of studies have focused on the background and context of shared education, and have provided an assessment of comparative examples of shared practice in other jurisdictions (Gallagher, 2005; O'Sullivan et al, 2008; Donnelly & Gallagher, 2008; Atkinson et al. 2007; Gallagher & Carlisle, 2010; Gallagher et al. 2010) SEP is also committed to the collection of high quality data to analyse and understand what is happening in collaborative contexts. Currently the data can be categorised into three main areas: first, activity data which record the extent of collaborative activity taking place within the partnerships; second, evaluative data seeking to assess the impact of the collaborative experience on pupils and teachers; and third, a series of parallel research projects are delving deeper into aspects of the collaborative experience and testing hypotheses from a number of theoretical frameworks, including contact theory. The most direct evidence on the impact of the shared education models to date has focused on activity indicators and on the type and extent of shared activities. An independent evaluation of the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme carried out by FGS McClure Watters (2010) provides a series of positive findings, in line with the programme's aims. Additionally there have been a number of qualitative assessments based on the perspectives of teachers and school principals (Knox, 2010; Duffy and Gallagher 2011). One such assessment carried out by Knox (2010) argued that the curricular focused approach employed by SEP, allied by pro-active attempts to bridge across institutional boundaries had achieved positive reconciliation effects. Knox (2010, p53) argued that 'well-established political boundaries have been crossed and there is now a normality in seeing pupils with different school uniforms mixing.'

## Section 2: Methodology

The SEP implementation team at Queen's University Belfast commissioned a small scale study to gather evidence of collaborative sustainability from schools involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme. This study is intended to inform SEP Management, the funders, Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland and also contribute to the literature on school collaboration in Northern Ireland. Prior to the research, three criteria were applied to the potential sample of schools involved in the first cohort. Firstly schools had to be lead partners; secondly, no longer in receipt of any funding from the Sharing Education Programme<sup>2</sup> and thirdly, the study should focus on school based programme Coordinators. These criteria excluded seven schools and produced a small sample size of five lead partner schools.

In the first instance, senior educational managers or teaching staff whose role it was to coordinate SEP activity between schools, were contacted by email and telephone in May 2011. All Coordinators responded promptly and qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out prior to end to the academic year 2011. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The semi structured interview focused on the following themes:

1. History of collaborative activity with partner schools
2. Dynamics of collaboration and shared educational activity
3. Logistical challenges of collaboration and shared education
4. Motivations to collaborate
5. Evidence of sustained collaboration and shared education post SEP1 funding
  - sustained pupil to pupil initiatives
  - remaining institutional links
  - continued teacher to teacher contact
  - INSET opportunities throughout the academic year
  - evidence of online/virtual collaboration
6. Willingness to sustain collaborative activity

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<sup>2</sup> The other lead schools received additional monies from funders to continue shared education activities for a further year.

7. The relationship between collaboration, shared education and community relations
8. The benefits of collaboration and shared education for pupils
9. Was the model of collaboration and shared education a good model that could be extended to other schools?
10. What conditions would be required to maintain collaboration and shared education between pupils post funding.

The schools are not directly identified in this report, but two were located in the west and three were located in the east of Northern Ireland. In two of the schools Principals took part in the study, in another, a vice principal and in the two remaining schools one member of staff was a subject head and in the other a teacher.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo 8 in June and July 2011. For the most part the themes explored at interview were used as the basis of a broad coding structure. After data analysis, the most significant themes, as well as the core research question, pertaining to sustainability are addressed in the following sections.

## 2.1 Limitations in the study

The scope of this study was somewhat small scale in that it focused on the perspectives of five SEP1 Coordinators, so caution should be exercised in drawing more general conclusions. Similarly, statements on programme impact should be treated carefully. Nonetheless the perspectives of Coordinators are valuable and provide an in depth account of programme implementation. It should be noted that the perspectives of the other key stake holders, including teachers and pupils, are not included here. Also missing are the views of primary schools and the perspective of schools who were not lead partners. Future studies would be greatly enriched by collecting the perspectives of all stakeholders. Having these perspectives would greatly improve our understanding of project impact and day to day implementation. Furthermore such perspectives would add to the emerging research on shared education and cross-sector collaboration in Northern Ireland.

## Section 3: The Five Schools and the Dynamics of Collaboration

The following section describes each of the schools involved in this study in terms of: school type, population, broad geographical location, details of their cross-sector partner school(s) and a summary of collaborative activities.

### 3.1 *School 1:*

This school is a controlled, co-educational high school with an identified subject specialism in the arts; located in a large town in the West catering for students from 11 to 18, with an approximate enrolment of 750 pupils. The majority of the pupils attending this school are Protestant. This school has a history of collaboration prior to SEP. The cross-sectoral aspect of the SEP1 partnership involved collaborating with three post primary schools; two voluntary co-educational Catholic schools and one voluntary, co-educational Grammar school. Also involved was an FE College and a number of controlled and maintained primary schools. Collaborative activities between this school and the post-primary schools involved School 1 offering a range of activities including dance, art, drama and moving image art. These activities were pitched at Key Stage 2 – 5. An Art teacher would provide services to primary schools and activity with a special school, involved an arrangement whereby students from School 1 would visit pupils and provide assistance developing their literacy skills.

### 3.2 *School 2:*

This school is a co-educational, non-denominational grammar school with a recognised subject specialism in a technology area; located within a town in a semi-rural setting in the East. The school caters for approximately 1,200 pupils between the ages of 11-18, most of whom are Protestant. School 2 formed a cross-sector partnership with a comprehensive college located some distance away in an urban setting in which the pupils are Catholic. Both schools used Drama at GCSE level and ICT as the basis of their collaborative activity. Year 11 students and staff engaged in regular face to face workshops and virtual collaboration, with the intention of creating a number of drama productions. In the first year of the programme a DVD was created featuring pupil performances on themes such as reconciliation, identity,

collaboration and young people's backgrounds. Students also worked with professional actors to present public performances of their work.

### 3.3 *School 3*

This school is a Catholic comprehensive college, with a recognised specialism in the arts, located within a city setting; catering for approximately 1,500 girls aged between 11 and 18. The school specialises in Performing Arts. School 3 formed a partnership with another school located in the same city. The partner school is a non-denominational, voluntary grammar school catering for girls from 11 to 18, most of whom are Protestant. Cross-sector collaboration between both schools involved a group of pupils at GCSE level from School 3, travelling to their partner school on a fortnightly basis to undertake a unit of GCSE Drama with a corresponding group of peers. Students were involved in at the decision to focus on the theme of reconciliation. Alongside shared classes, students and staff involved attended a two day residential with a professional theatre practitioner. A VLE was used as a supplement when students were not involved in face to face contact. Pupils also performed to public audiences in various venues in the city and in each other's schools to fellow pupils, parents and staff; exploring themes such as reconciliation, social background and being a teenager. The partnership also produced a performance DVD and pupils attended productions together.

### 3.4 *School 4*

This school is a Catholic grammar, with a recognised specialism in the arts, located within a city setting; catering for approximately 1200 boys aged 11-18. School 3 formed a partnership with a number of post primary and primary schools within the same contested space in the city. This partnership involved collaborating with: one integrated post primary school, one controlled post primary school, one non-denominational co-educational grammar, four primary schools (two integrated, one controlled and one Catholic) and one special school. Activity in this partnership centred on sharing sports facilities, services and coaching to the schools within the partnership and additionally for the post primary schools undertaking a course in Living in a Divided Societies (delivered by an independent agency at the lead school). The latter, involved Year 13 students from the lead school and similar age

groups from partner schools attending shared classes together covering: reconciliation, identity and citizenship themes.

### 3.5 *School 5*

This school is a Catholic maintained girls' non-selective college, with a recognised specialism in the arts, located within a city setting. It caters for over 900 pupils aged 11-18. . School 5 formed a partnership with two post primary schools: an integrated college and controlled secondary college. All three schools operate within a contested city site. There are a number of aspects to this partnership including shared dance, drama and music classes for post-16 pupils. In year one this involved the lead school and the integrated school, then pupils from the controlled college in years 2 and 3 became involved. The other aspects of the shared education programme involved students being able to avail of a Diploma in Health and Social Care and pupils and staff from all three schools visiting a WW1 museum in Europe with the aim of looking at the impact of conflict and remembrance.

## Section 4: Logistics and Challenges Posed by Collaboration

All five SEP1 schools identified a number of logistical challenges posed by cross – sector collaboration that remain consistent with previous evidence (Knox (2010); Donnelly and Gallagher (2008); and Hughes et al (2010)). The challenges included: timetabling, transport and time travelling between schools; clashes between schools’ cultures or ethos and the challenges posed by collaborating in contested space.

### 4.1 *Timetabling and Transport*

Establishing an agreed time to undertake collaborative activity was identified by all schools as the most significant challenge. In the first instance, part of this difficulty was not so much about agreeing a time for shared education but the impact this had on the overall structure of each of the schools’ timetables. One of the SEP coordinators described school timetables as like a ‘sacred cow’; whereby schools were reluctant to change timetables because of the knock on effects of pupils leaving schools and travel to and from schools had on other subjects. The following extract describes how one school went to great lengths to ensure that SEP activity had minimal impact on their own timetable:

*There was only a small window of opportunity and the only time we had was first thing in the morning. Our pupils could leave here and get to there and do their hour of work and come back again without impacting on any other subject. Because of the way their periods ran it was possible with a 20 minute bus journey over to there we left before our registration, we arrived in time for their class, did class with them, on the bus back again during our break times – the children had their break on the bus and then ready for the next class, so no subject was impacted upon.*

SEP Coordinator from School 3

The above extract also highlights another logistical concern identified by schools, in terms of the length of time that was taken up in the process of travelling from one school to another:

*[...] on a Wednesday afternoon in order to get the kids down for 2.30 we were going to have to take them out class at 2.00 and if the programme ran from 2.30 to 3.30 by the time we bussed them back up to [school name] or back over to [school name] it was going to be closer to 4.00 and sometimes the students had buses to catch and they missed their bus. So it is not only a 1 hour session it becomes a 2 almost a 2 and a half hour session. So the transportation and the distance the kids had to travel was a major factor.*

SEP Coordinator from School 4

Schools however argued that timetabling SEP activity was easier in the second and third years of collaboration because ‘schools became more used to it’ (School 5 Coordinator), timetablers had enough notice and were able to assign this activity a slot in the timetable. An SEP coordinator (School 3) described building the entire school timetable around SEP activity and the Co-ordinator in School 5 described how timetablers from each of the schools were now able to meet at ALC forums to ensure that timetables were in sync to accommodate shared education activities. The same coordinator argued: ‘timetabling and transport can always be used as an excuse not to do something.’

#### 4.2 School Culture Clash

School coordinators talked about how, at times, differences in the cultural practices and ethos of schools proved challenging for students in the course of collaboration. In some cases these challenges were a consequence of different expressions of cultural, national and political identities. The SEP Coordinator in a Catholic school, for example, described her discomfort during an event in her partner school when the British National Anthem was played.

The SEP Coordinator in School 4 recounts how the numbers of female students from one of the partner controlled schools began to decrease over a number of months. The Coordinator felt that students from the partner school may have reacted negatively to the appearance and religious iconography around the school, but explained that two students remained involved; both these students, in fact, were Catholic and it was suggested that they were less likely to be daunted by the religious iconography:

*I think the likes of coming into [school name] you have the cross as soon as you come in through the door and you have all the pictures of the past presidents and the majority of them were from the priesthood. It would be very daunting for kids who have never seen that on a regular basis.*

SEP Coordinator School 4

In other cases coordinators were keen to point that issues could also be about themes beyond religion and politics, and included issues such as social background,



class, the secondary/grammar divide, gender and even the idea an urban/rural divide between schools. In School 3, the Coordinator talked about feeling 'social tensions' under the surface, between the two groups of students:

*The girls were lovely. They were always there to meet us and were like come on in come on in... So that wasn't an issue. A few times we went to the canteen where we had coffee and scones and juice at the end of things and that was always lovely. Underneath it all you could feel the social tensions there. I know our girls would have felt that. That would be one thing that would hold me back.*

SEP Coordinator School 3

The Coordinator of School 3 talked about feeling nervous in terms of pupils' appearance and how they spoke in comparison to the pupils from their partner school (a grammar) and described a sense of caution and a pressure to 'be careful with the school's reputation':

*When you look at the post primary versus perceived grammar school in [the city] there's lots of that can identify somebody on a stage that isn't about talents and abilities. So that has to be really worked on. That put more stress on me in terms of ensuring that there were equitable outcomes. Do you know what I mean, in terms of the way the girls were speaking?*

SEP Coordinator School 3

The Coordinator in School 2 provided a useful account of the challenges posed by cross-sectoral collaboration:

*Going back to some of the areas we spoke about earlier, urban/rural a very basic one the kids from [city name] couldn't believe that they had to drive through green fields just to get here. Our kids on the other hand could not believe some of things they saw painted on walls to get their school. That was a very simple cultural thing and would happen anywhere in the world. The Protestant / Catholic thing, walking around [school name], the religious iconography that goes with being a Catholic school in that part of [city name]. Likewise when the kids come here there is a union flag flying alongside a European flag outside the school. And there is a formality to our grammar school ethos, I mean in a very simple way the headmaster will say there is a uniform for kids but there is also a uniform for staff. If you teach a practical subject you wear a white coat, if you teach an academic subject you wear a black gown and while that is not universally held to, that part of the ethos and culture. You can't put your finger on it, there's an example, it's part of a statement of the tradition and background of both schools that neither school would wish to give up.*

SEP Coordinator School 2

Alongside these challenges a number of Coordinators described ways in which they or pupils coped with different schools' ethos. The Coordinator at School 1 described

how it was more beneficial to turn a blind eye to how students from other schools were dressed or their use of mobile phones or MP3 players. The Coordinator in School 2 described how a teacher exchange gave staff from each school an opportunity to understand and adjust to their partner schools (See Section 7.2). Other Coordinators suggested that supplementing schools with neutral and residential venues for shared education activities could allay negative feelings or concerns about having to visit each other's schools.

#### 4.3 Collaborating in Contested Space

Contested space could be defined as an area which is populated by two or more groups of people, broadly defined as having different religious, cultural, historical and or political perspectives. Two of the schools in this study are located within city settings which have historically witnessed significant sectarian clashes. The spaces in which both schools and their partner schools are located could be defined as contested spaces. Both spaces have witnessed fragmentation along religious and political lines and identified as being within the top 20% of deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Movement of pupils from different religious and cultural backgrounds across these contested spaces is in itself valuable in terms of exposing students and teachers to different cultural practice. School 5, for example, is partnered with another school which occupies the same contested space. As a consequence, there have been, at times, a number of logistical challenges for each of the schools involved in SEP Collaboration. The SEP Coordinator in School 5 describes how events in the local community inevitably place challenges on staff and pupils involved in collaboration:

*There were days and flashpoints where I would have talked to our girls and said be vigilant in this upcoming period and that was particularly true after the death of a police man, particularly after dissident graffiti in the [town name] which was very pro the killing of that PSNI person, because ultimately that was high in the media and these children coming from the [town name] over to [school name]. So at particular times, Easter, marching season, any marching season, you would talk to your girls and say just be particularly vigilant.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

School 4 is also situated within a contested space and, from the Coordinators perspective, getting the support of some parents was a challenge. It was suggested

that a number of parents were reluctant or resistant to their idea of their children visiting schools which were located on the *other side* of the contested space. Furthermore, involving parents and getting parents to travel across contested space was a challenge:

*It's a big ask from parents in [Protestant Area] to come up here and you wouldn't get many kids from the [Catholic Area] going across to the [Protestant Area] for activities. I think parental influence is massive. Obviously the teachers have their part to play but they can only sell it to certain point. When they go home their parents are saying you know what, you are not going there. I think the problem lies at home and with the parents.*

SEP Coordinator School 4

All of the examples considered above highlight the logistical and social challenges involved in collaborative work between schools across the denominational divide in Northern Ireland, but it is a testament to the commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers that they developed and enhanced the level of collaborative engagement over the three year period of the project during which funding support was available. The main purpose of the present study was to examine the extent to which it was possible to sustain some of that collaborative work once the project funding ceased.

## Section 5: Sustainability and the Willingness to Collaborate

The core aim of this study was to ascertain if after the first cohort of SEP funding, were schools able to sustain collaborative activity? Schools made the obvious links between funding, project implementation and sustainability; maintaining that current practice was not sustainable without the funds to support it. However this says nothing about schools willingness to sustain collaboration post funding in a variety of forms. The following section demonstrates a wealth of evidence that schools continued to collaborate with one another. In all cases there remained some form of collaboration between schools and crucially sustained institutional links after funding ceased. However, some schools have maintained much higher levels of collaboration than others. In terms of sustainability, the following suggests that the experience of SEP1 has facilitated: sustained relationships between teachers and educational managers in partnered schools; in some cases sustained contact between Head Teachers and Boards of Governors; for some schools, continued cross-sectoral collaborative activity and in other cases evolving collaborative projects where schools who wish to sustain collaboration, have sought alternative funding to do so. *Table 1* demonstrates the type and extent of sustainable activity in schools post SEP 1 funding.

### 5.1 Sustaining Institutional links via staff relationships

*For teachers, we all understood the underlying values of the course or the project. We are all trying to achieve the same thing acting in the benefits of our students. So there was collaboration there but there was also team work and that will stand by us even when SEP leaves.*

SEP Coordinator School 4

In all cases SEP Co-ordinators talked about maintaining relationships with their counterparts in partner schools, post SEP funding. In some cases, the extent of this relationship was maintained, but limited to email and telephone contact. In other cases, sustained relationships were much more extensive and involved both personal and professional contact:

*In terms of professional development I still have that relationship with the member of staff...I'm a principal moderator for GCSE [subject removed] and I would support her through that in terms of materials and example work and online sharing and the introduction of new courses. We have introduced a new course here and have provided some INSET for her on that. And she is thinking about doing that in her school next year.*

*[...] Other regular contact where I will support her with AS and A2 work as well. [...] She has also provided me with some work. She is doing her GCSE agreement trial in October with her class and they are performing at that. So that has continued.*

SEP Coordinator School 3

A number of Coordinators suggested that the staff relationships that were created during the SEP1 period were valuable to them and if anything, alongside pupil to pupil contact, one of the most significant outcomes of cross-sectoral collaboration. A Coordinator went as far as suggesting:

*A project is all about the relationships. I think if we started SEP again and we were starting afresh I would spend more time on building relationships and stop speeding ahead with the project.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Coordinators described various levels of relationships that developed including pupil to pupil, teacher to teacher and relationships at managerial and Governor level. SEP Coordinators in this study ranged from teachers to Head Teachers and as a consequence the way in which they talked about sustained relationships differed. Teacher Coordinators involved in the study, tended to talk about actual sustained Coordinator to Coordinator contact, whereas the two Head Teachers involved in the study tended to talk more broadly about sustained relationships between institutions, between school managers and Governors:

*Governor relationships have developed through SEP and they are very good and we would have [school name] Governors at our events, that relationship is very strong and at leadership level as well, between [name] and [name] and our leadership team. The teacher contact, [name] would have made some very good contacts at [school name] and they would obviously be maintained as well. Those relationships are now very easy to sustain.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

The Coordinator in School 5 describes an encouraging example of sustainability whereby the science departments of both schools, who crucially, were not involved in SEP have, as a result of witnessing successful collaboration by other departments in the school, formed links with each other:

*I'd say it has gone beyond SEP because already there was links between the science departments and they weren't even involved in this, the links in the science department in*

*looking at achievement in science and new courses in science. One of our science teachers went over to [school name] to talk about science and then their science teachers come over here.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

## 5.2 Sustained collaborative activities

Table 1 outlines the extent and types of sustained activity that all five schools are currently involved in, post SEP1. It is evident that some schools are engaged in collaborative activity more so than others. For some schools, the extent of collaboration is in the form of teacher to teacher collaboration who remain in contact by telephone or email but in other cases collaborative activity includes sustained and regular pupil to pupil contact or one off contact events much of which are extensions of the SEP1 pupil initiatives.

Other schools have made use of VLE technologies to maintain contact. Co-ordinators cited helping their counterparts in terms professional development. In some cases sustained activity is no longer cross-sectoral but inter-sectoral. In two cases particularly with Schools 4 and 5 both have, with their SEP partners sought alternative funding to sustain cross-sectoral collaboration.

School 1 maintains two staff members who were originally employed under SEP1. In both cases these staff members operate on reduced hours but their duties continue to relate to activity that was originally SEP1 activity. In one case, a teacher still delivers cross-sector dance classes as School 1 continues to maintain this collaborative activity with a maintained partner school. The other member of staff also continues to serve shared classes in terms of maintaining IT resources and in particular VLE facilities at the school which continues to be used to sustain a partnership with another maintained school post SEP1.

<b>Schools</b>	<b>Sustained Collaborative Activity Post SEP1 Funding</b>
<b>School 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two members of staff who were hired to facilitate SEP activity remain in post but on reduced hours. Both continue to deliver same activities that were borne out of SEP1. Funding for these positions now come from alternative sources.</li> <li>Students from SEP1 partner school continue to travel to school for sustained cross-sectoral collaborative activity. Travel is funded by partner school.</li> <li>School 1 remains involved in SEP activity as a partner with another SEP2 lead school.</li> <li>Collaborative SEP activity set up with a local special needs school continues post funding.</li> <li>Strong links and regular communication between schools involved in SEP1 activity remains. Principals remain in regular contact</li> </ul>
<b>School 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little sustainable activity remains</li> <li>Some staff contact between schools remains but this moved from institutional to personal contact. Two members of teaching staff have developed a personal relationship and maintain contact via email</li> <li>Students from partner school remain registered on lead school's VLE</li> </ul>
<b>School 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools have remained in contact making use of virtual technologies post SEP1 funding to showcase a drama project both schools were involved in.</li> <li>Students from both schools have also attended the theatre together in preparation for GCSE exam</li> <li>Both teachers involved in coordinating SEP1 activity in their respective schools remain in close contact and continue to share resources.</li> <li>SEP1 lead Coordinator has provided INSET training for partner school coordinator and aided professional development</li> </ul>
<b>School 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative work based on reconciliation and citizenship education continues to develop between lead and partner schools. School now receives funding from an alternative source to sustain activity originating from SEP1</li> <li>School continues to offer sporting activities on Saturdays to schools in local community. There remains limited cross-sectoral activity.</li> <li>Links with a special school in the local community as a result of SEP1 funding remain in place. Lead school continues to provide and host sporting activity for pupils.</li> <li>Links with a local integrated post primary school and two primary schools that emerged from SEP1 are still in place. Lead school provides sporting activities and is involved</li> <li>Maintain contact with staff at various schools involved in SEP1</li> </ul>
<b>School 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School 5 cites a strong relationship between Principals and Governors has been maintained post SEP1 funding</li> <li>Strong relationship between teachers have been maintained</li> <li>The partnership along with new members including a primary and a post primary school have applied for funding from OFMDFM to sustain and advance collaborative partnership to deliver cross-sectoral activity in contested space.</li> <li>Post 16 A level programme continues to operate post SEP1 funding</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Sustainable Activity Post SEP1 Funding**

### **5.3 Sustaining Collaboration via Alternative Funding**

Schools identified that SEP funding enabled them to maintain and sustain quality collaboration. Absent the availability of additional external funding, or systemic change in core funding to incentivise and support collaboration, lack of or reduced funding was likely to lead to a drop in both the quality and the quantity of

collaborative activity. Schools frequently highlighted for example, that transporting students to partner sites was expensive but at the same an essential aspect of facilitating sustained, face to face and long term collaborative partnership. Without transport, school collaboration would if at all, be reduced to non-sustainable, one off events or reduced to virtual engagement.

As a consequence, in two schools, Coordinators discussed the desire to continue their partnerships and therefore sustain cross sectoral collaborative activity by seeking funding from alternative sources once SEP1 funding had ceased. Arguably cross-sectoral collaboration over three years has helped create mature and sustainable partnerships:

*Sustainability, it has to sustain itself, it has to sustain itself beyond SEP [...] Possibly we would have found another route. It is very useful to have the money to transport the students from one place to another. [...] We will meet tomorrow. Now not all meetings are arranged by Queen's, you know like [name] and I will meet at lunch tomorrow to hammer this out for our schools and we don't feel the need to have somebody else chair that meeting and that's the first time that has happened. And you should never underestimate the first time of anything.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

School 5 in particular discussed plans to sustain its partnership with a controlled school but also to broaden this partnership by including another maintained school, (also involved in SEP) and a series of maintained and controlled primary schools in the local area. This new partnership has managed to secure alternative funds and plans to continue to deliver cross-sector pupil to pupil contact at KS3 via Learning for Life and Work aspect of the curriculum and PDMU at years 5 and 7. The partnership also intends to develop shared school policies and share a number teacher INSET days. The SEP Coordinator in School 5 commented on the fact that this new partnership was an evolution from SEP1 and was made possible because of the relationships that had been established. The Coordinator also expressed some concern highlighting that the relationships between the staff involved were crucial its success. If staff were to leave this may prove detrimental to the partnership:

*And we are not starting a ground zero anymore we are starting up at level one; we will now bring this to level 2 or hopefully level 3. There may be wee steps back occasionally but you are always going forward with this and the huge benefits is that we don't have to back to baseline and get to know each other again. We know what will work and what*



*won't work, we will have all been in the job together. My big fear will be that if key personnel in this change and then where do you go if your key personnel change and there is your challenge for sustainability.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

The above extract reiterates the fact that successful and positive relationships formed by staff between schools are vital in sustaining institutional links and the development of mature partnerships.

#### 5.4 A Willingness to Collaborate

A by-product of the experience of schools being involved in SEP1 appears to be a willingness to collaborate. All schools, irrespective of the extent of collaboration post SEP1, highlighted that they were more than willing to collaborate with other schools in the future. Arguably the Sharing Education Programme is helping to create and sustain a culture of school collaboration and cross-sectoral collaboration in Northern Ireland. A Coordinator went as far as saying:

*The thing [SEP] has entered our bloodstream; it has become the virus and the DNA of the place*

SEP Coordinator School 1

The Coordinator from School 5 recalls how at a conference there appeared to be a much more positive reaction from delegates to the idea of collaboration from schools involved in SEP, compared to schools who had not been involved in collaboration to the same extent:

*I was at a conference and they were talking about sharing and improvement, collaboration versus competition where the two can sit quite comfortably side by side. The idea was thrown out the schools share baker days and that they are timetabled and there is lots of inter-staff movement and staff development training. I swear if you sat out front you could have spotted the SEP schools who were thinking that might work. But there were audible (makes gasp noise) [...] other than maybe sending pupils out for the entitlement framework that might have been the extent of it.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

The Coordinator in School 2 argued the experience of SEP has helped change the perception of teachers who would have otherwise viewed collaboration as being

disruptive for the school and pupils alike. The following extract demonstrates how the experience of SEP has removed the 'stigma' of collaboration:

*Within our staff, the idea of collaboration is something that has had up until now a stigma attached to it. Because the nature of collaboration often involves compromise around the edges of staff getting out of class, pupils getting out of class and perhaps the benefit in one area is as a result of a perception of at least, whether it is real or imagined a perception of cost elsewhere. Having had the success that we have had with SEP that has been challenged in the staff room and collaboration is something that can provide very positive outcomes.*

SEP Coordinator School 2

Others argued that the experience of SEP had provided their school with a 'template' for successful collaboration in the future. This template would help strengthen any future bids for funding because they could demonstrate to a potential funder that they had experience collaborating with other schools:

*There is now a template that I know for me personally I am happy to go to another funder and say look I know this works, this is a template that we have tried and tested and we have run for three years that I know can produce these kinds of quality outcomes.*

SEP Coordinator School 4

## 5.5 Summary

All of these schools involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme could, to varying degrees, demonstrate evidence of sustained cross-sectoral collaborative activity, post funding. Much of this sustainability is largely due to the positive relationships that developed between staff and educational managers involved in the project. All schools demonstrated a willingness to collaborate in the future and a number of them sought alternative funding to sustain collaborative activity that arose out of their involvement in the Sharing Education Programme.

## Section 6: The Benefits of Collaboration

The data collected from interviews with the Coordinators of the five SEP1 schools reveals, from their perspective, a variety of benefits from cross-sector collaboration including: community relations benefits, pupil benefits and how institutions and staff benefit.

One of the distinct benefits they identified arising from collaboration is the way in which institutions develop and sustain relationships with one another. For the most part this is largely mediated via the relationships that develop between staff, departments, educational managers and Governors. Much of this has already been discussed in Section 5 and will therefore not be addressed further in this section. The remainder of the section will instead focus on how communities, pupils and schools benefit from cross-sectoral collaboration.

### 6.1 Community Relations Benefits

As previously highlighted in Section 4 the impact of events in the community particularly those of a sectarian nature, have the potential to be felt in the classroom; especially classrooms of schools in contested spaces, and as a consequence pupils and staff involved in cross-sectoral collaboration must negotiate their way through a myriad of potential challenges that are borne out of living in a divided society.

*[...] it just depends on the political outlook at the time. Like before the last election. It is an intense political time and it affects the school as the school is a community within a community, so whatever goes on outside in the community goes on inside the school.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Tensions or sectarian incidents were for the most part, not realised in classrooms, but in one case, a Coordinator reported a number of incidents between pupils:

*[...] they had been called Fenians, threatened physically; they had their taxi stoned and they had been made to feel unwelcome by some, but they were sensible enough to think not all.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

These incidents did not reoccur and may have provided a catalyst to encourage both schools to work more closely together in terms of preventing and responding to such incidents. In this case the Coordinator described how the incident came to the

attention of the local media and as a result both Principals discussed the incidents on a local radio programme. The Coordinator described the process as positive, said that it helped build relationships between both schools, and the schools benefitted from the opportunity publically to demonstrate to the local community their commitment to continue cross-sector collaboration.

Other Coordinators suggested that in the course of the programme, some parents posed challenges to the project and at times had a part to play in resisting the idea of cross-sector collaboration. Other Coordinators however, were keen to point out that parents of pupils involved in cross sector collaboration were supportive. One Coordinator talked about how teachers and head teachers were not immune to the resonance or legacy of the troubles; they too have come through the troubles and bring with them into the classroom with their own 'automatic biases' that may impact either positively or negatively on project delivery. The Coordinator in School 5 argued that one of the motivations for getting involved in cross-sector collaboration was to prevent the *past* from returning:

*I think for many of us head teachers we have to revisit the way we were brought up. The way we were brought up in Northern Ireland. And would we want that because the one thing I think all head teachers are committed to the future for our children and would we want our pasts for their future. I certainly wouldn't want my past to be one where you couldn't get home from school every day and you lived under constant fear, you would not want that for any of your children.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Coordinators regularly talked about the potency of cultural symbols and practices and how aspects of shared lessons involved negotiating how these symbols and practices would best be displayed, practised or referenced during pupil to pupil contact. As examples, Coordinators talked about the impact of pupils wearing poppies; crosses on pupils' foreheads on Ash Wednesday; how students would react to different uniforms, iconography and other religious symbols; schools flying the Union Flag; or even pupils being exposed imagery, in particular murals in communities where schools are located:

*Our kids on the other hand could not believe some of things they saw painted on walls to get their school [partner school]. That was a very simple cultural thing and wouldn't happen anywhere else in the world.*

SEP Coordinator School 2

*[...] the idea of them going into a Catholic school and passing a statue of whatever, it is a difficult one, you know, those with a junior Orange background.*

SEP Coordinator School 1

Coordinators frequently cited that cross-sector collaboration, while beset with challenges, offered significant community relations benefits. For a number of the Coordinators, the sheer fact of moving pupils through contested space was hugely significant. Others identified that pupil to pupil contact, exposed students to different religious and cultural practice. One Coordinator proposed that cross sector collaboration between schools and pupils had the potential to be a prominent symbol of reconciliation in the community. The Coordinator in School 1 talked about a poster in one of the partner schools, acting as ‘a great symbol’ in that it displayed images of students together from the lead school and two other post primary partner schools involved in SEP. He said it makes ‘a statement about how adults can organise things so their kids can be together.’ The same Coordinator recalled how the experience of SEP provided an opportunity via work with primary schools, to bring many sections of the community together:

*I think one of the best things we did was to use the arts to bring the primary schools together. They were great warm vibrant experiences; also for kids from the mountains and the enclaves to be down in the town mixing. They don't have an issue with it and then to be bringing the parents together for a celebration of what they were doing. Those to me were the most vibrant educational experience that I have had in a very long time. I went home with a great buzz like I have done something valuable.*

SEP Coordinator School 1

## 6.2 Pupil Benefits

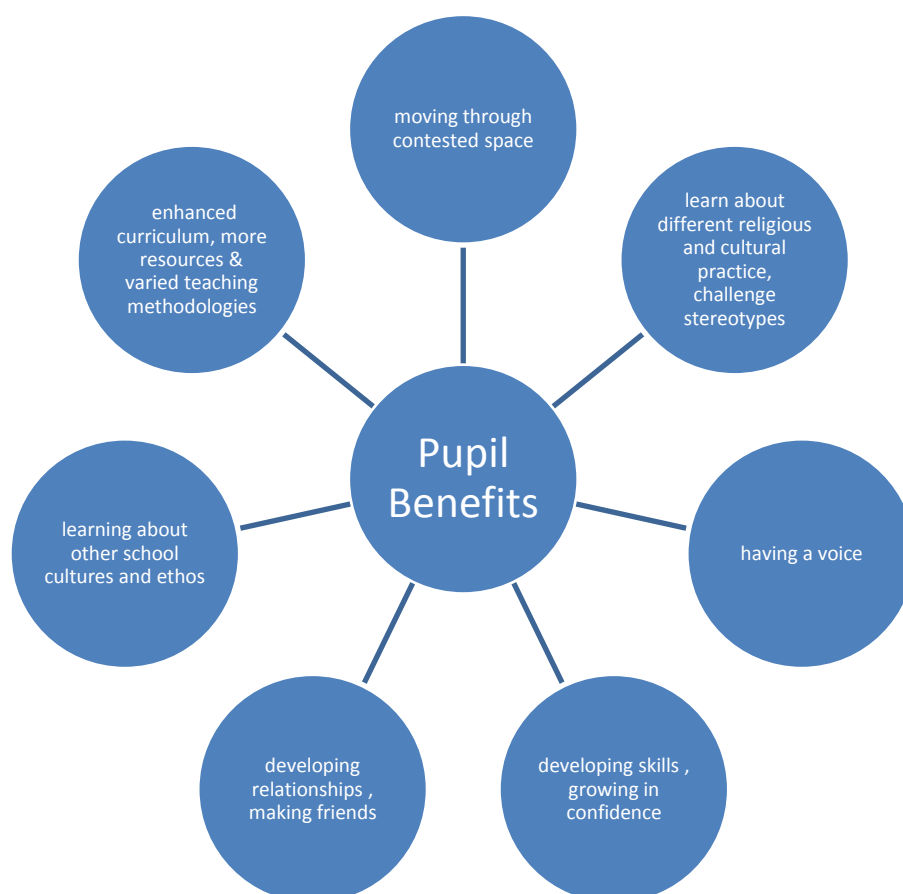
Coordinators were asked to outline how cross-sectoral collaboration benefited pupils, (see Figure 1). The following will address in some part, community relations benefits but for the most part, focuses on the wealth of data highlighting benefits other than community relations. The Coordinator from School 3 argued that involvement in SEP provided:

*A really good opportunity for our girls, it gave them an insight into another school and another way of life. It became the focus of their social differences rather than religious. It was more to do with that in the end.*

SEP Coordinator School 3

In terms of community relations it has been highlighted above that Coordinators felt that students benefited from having opportunity to move through contested space, to learn about other school cultures, as well as be exposed to different religious and cultural practices and to explore these differences via the curriculum, particularly through citizenship education. One Coordinator argued that SEP provided opportunity to challenge how young people stereotype one another while another argued that pupil to pupil contact provided a plethora of opportunities for 'pupils to work with other pupils from another school with different perspectives.'

Another benefit cited by a number of the Coordinators was the relationships that pupils develop with one another. In some cases these relationships are further evidence of sustainability, post funding. A number of the Coordinators identified how students remained in contact with one another via email and social networking mediums such as Facebook. In another case a Coordinator explained that students involved in cross-sector contact had formed a band, which was now made up of members from seven schools in the community. The same Coordinator also recalled how during a partner school event, she witnessed approximately 40 students from her school attending the event. The Coordinator was keen to point out that the students attended this event of their own volition because of the relationships they had formed with the students whom they shared lessons with and were now maintaining outside of the parameters of SEP. Figure 1 below outlines the range of pupil benefits cited by Coordinators.



**Figure 1: Pupil Benefits**

Co-ordinators highlighted that students benefitted from involvement in SEP in terms of developing new skills and growing in confidence. One Coordinator argued that involvement in such a project would, in the future, help students to be able to ‘stand on their own two feet’ and ‘have a voice’ Another argued that the project had not just ‘educational but social value.’ One Co-ordinator highlighted that his students were learning not just about cultural differences but also about different learning abilities and needs through valuable experience working with young people with learning difficulties. Another Coordinator explained that their students as a result of being involved in SEP (who were involved in drama project at GCSE level) were able to experience a wealth of opportunities not normally afforded to them, such as: being able to perform to much larger audiences, work with professional actors and drama teachers from other schools; perform in venues such as the Waterfront Hall and as a consequence able to benefit from media attention in both local and national press. The impact of such opportunities the teacher argued:

*[...] upped the ante in terms of their attainment. I also think in terms of their confidence and self esteem and their ability to think beyond themselves. [...] It was worthwhile particularly when you saw the outcomes and the reaction of the girls and how proud they were of themselves and the parents as well. But maybe it was that nature of the project that other projects wouldn't have had.*

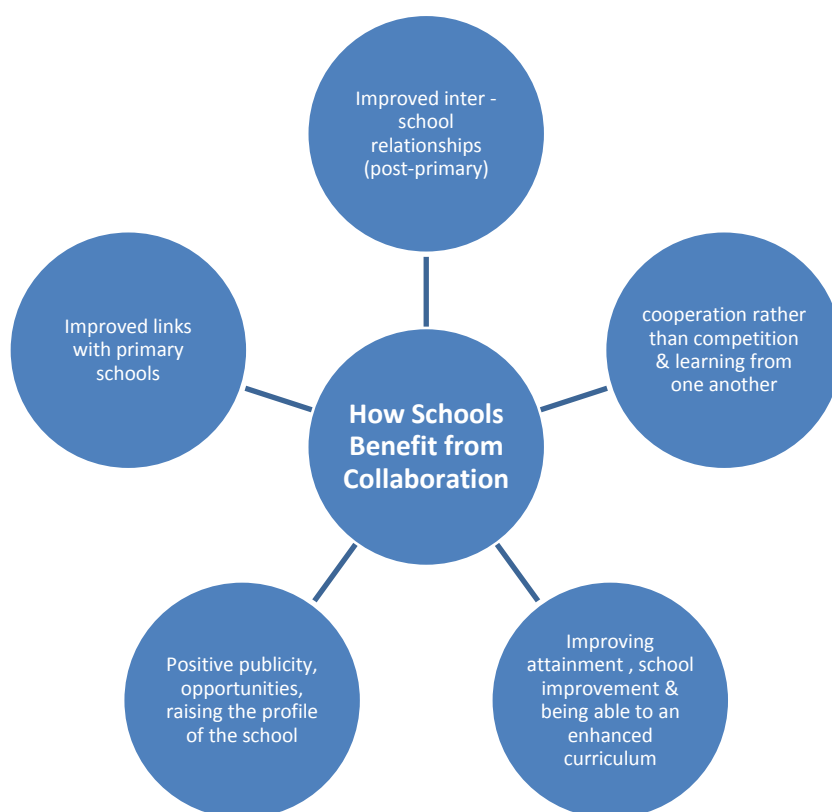
SEP Coordinator School 3

Other Co-ordinators highlighted similar benefits in terms of pupil attainment and providing valuable ways in which to deliver the curriculum. Two of the Coordinators argued that, because of SEP, students were very much involved in planning project outcomes and learning intentions. As a result, according the Coordinator in School 2, it was the students who 'drove the themes' and that there was a 'sense that we were helping them achieve what they wanted to in terms of the curriculum and actual performance.'

### *6.3 How Schools Benefit from Collaboration*

Each of the Coordinators were asked to outline how involvement in the first cohort of SEP benefitted their school. An analysis of the data on this theme reveals five key benefits of school collaboration, (see Figure 2).





**Figure 2: How Schools Benefit from Collaboration**

A number of schools talked about how the experience of collaboration promotes cooperation as opposed to competition. The Coordinator at School 5 explained how a new partnership (previously described in Section 5.3), which now involves another Catholic post-primary, is providing opportunities for the schools to ‘work together’ in their community rather than typically compete. Both schools would have competed for the enrolment of Catholic girls and are geographically close. Additionally, School 5 described acting as a point of guidance for its partner school in preparations for school inspection:

*If one school is on a self improvement and they are talking to another school, you are going to push improvement in one school and push improvement in another. It's not about competition anymore.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Several of the schools identified opportunities to learn from one another. One Coordinator explained: ‘if I walked into [school name] for half an hour I would learn something that I would want to bring back here.’ Another Coordinator suggested that

the experience of being involved in SEP activity provided opportunities for schools to learn from each other and even challenge one another to improve:

*I asked myself this today, how can we learn from the other school? How can they learn from us? How would they respond if I said I want to teach you this or I want to challenge you about this aspect of your school culture?*

SEP Coordinator School 1

A number of the schools talked about how the experience of collaboration, while involved in the first SEP cohort, had the potential to improve pupil attainment and broaden opportunity. In two cases, Coordinators argued that collaboration and funding allowed the school to better meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework<sup>3</sup>. The Coordinator at School 1 argued that the key focus of the school remains the 'curriculum and curricular options' and suggested that a culture of collaboration is now common place in the community where the school is situated; he argued that 'longstanding relationships' and now collaborative working between schools because of SEP helps the school meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. The Coordinator at school 5 also explained that while improving community relations was an important goal, initially they felt that SEP funding could help them meet the Entitlement Framework by allowing them to add two extra subjects at A Level. A number of the schools described how being involved in the SEP1 Cohort helped improve their school and in turn improve the opportunities that students could avail off. One Coordinator explained that the collaborative arrangement with their cross-sector partner helped develop and improve one of the school's departments:

*The experience has improved the standing of drama and even in the economic climate has helped the subject embed and is secure. The school also benefited in terms of using its ICT specialism to drive projects such as SEP forward. [...] Kids were able to perform on a professional stage, without the SEP experience the kids may never have been able to do this.*

SEP Coordinator School 2

Schools also talked about how being involved in the Sharing Education Programme provided them with 'positive publicity' and raised the profile of their schools; one

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Education for Northern Ireland (2010) *Delivering the Entitlement Framework by 2013*, DENI

Coordinator (School 3) described this as 'kudos.' Another Coordinator (School 1) similarly described this as 'another string for your bow'

*But also being on the track of SEP and the kudos for that and the acknowledgement for the work; the positive publicity it brought and the opportunities, all of those things*

SEP Coordinator School 3

Finally, the Coordinator at School 1 suggested that being involved in SEP had greatly improved the schools opportunities to work with primary schools in the local community and to share some of what the school specialised in; the Coordinator placed emphasis on this, describing such collaborative activity as some of the most 'vibrant educational experiences' he had had in a long time.

## Section 7: What Constitutes Good Practice and Collaborative Maturity

Participants were asked to reflect on the three years in which they had been involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme. In doing so, they were asked to extract out what they felt was good practice and constructive criticism, as well as outline if any of this practice had transferability or applicability for the education system in Northern Ireland. Some of the comments outlined in Section 4 are pertinent here also. Based on the Coordinators perspectives, the SEP model was attractive because it was pragmatic and non-prescriptive. Aside from cross-sector sharing, each of the schools' collaborative models differed. Previous sections of this report demonstrate that schools tended to adapt shared education models to fit the context and needs of their own schools. Most agreed that relationship building between teachers and managers developed and sustained institutional relationships. Good relationships improved collaboration. Coordinators argued that as much as institutional buy in was important, so to was the support and involvement of parents. The following section will provide a summary of each of the schools' perspectives on best practice, separately. These messages of best practice have been used to form a diagram which demonstrates a type of progression towards a model of effective collaboration (See Figure 3).

### 7.1 *School 1*

The Coordinator of SEP activity at School 1 argued that despite much of the emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration being at the post-primary level, collaborating with primary schools was particularly valuable. The Coordinator argued 'one of the best things we did was bring arts to the primary schools'. In doing so the Coordinator suggested that it was easier to engage and gain the support of parents at the primary level because they offer less resistance to the idea of cross-sector collaboration. This in turn better promotes the idea of cross sector collaboration in the community, provides space and venue within communities for adults with different cultural backgrounds to come into contact, potentially improving community relations.

The Coordinator also advised that having a dedicated member of staff whose sole role it was to manage collaborative activity was important to the success of a

partnership. This dedicated person could focus on generating, promoting and managing partnership working between schools:

*If I could have had one thing to bring forward from SEP1 it would be have been allowed to have a teacher to generate such activities. I understand from SEP2 there has been a tightening up of employing people to do such activity but how else are you gonna do such a thing other than by human beings who are actually resourced to do it. Education is first and foremost a human activity.*

SEP Coordinator School 1

The Coordinator argued that he was entirely committed to the idea of collaboration and highlighted that to some extent, collaboration was taking place irrespective of SEP, via the Area Learning Communities. However, it was argued that collaboration requires additional funding at a systemic level and there were concerns that due to the economic climate, funds would shrink and eventually funding for ALCs would cease. From the staff member's perspective, the collaborative activity generated by ALC involvement did not equate to the extent and depth collaborative taking place in schools as a result of SEP. The Sharing Education Programme was described as the foremost initiative that best recognised and promoted the value of cross-sectoral collaboration and crucially was able to provide funds and support to schools to realise this:

*It's brilliant of the funding there to support and encourage it [collaboration]. We felt like jeepers there is somebody who recognises that this is good stuff and were prepared to put money behind it. It kind of happens anyway but with the tightening of resources it becomes more difficult.*

SEP Coordinator School 1

## 7.2 School 2

School 2 provided an excellent example of good practice which demonstrates clearly, how SEP models differed from school to school. Alongside shared pupil initiatives, the Coordinator talked about designing and implementing a teacher exchange programme for those involved in delivering shared education. After seeking approval from both sets of Governors, teachers from School 2 and their partner school swapped schools and temporarily taught their counterparts teaching timetable. The Coordinator argued that there was great value in providing opportunities for teachers to understand more about the culture and contexts of each

other's schools and thus strengthen institutional relationships as well as providing opportunities for 'personal contact and relationship building between staff' which was described as the 'ground stone of the project':

*The staff swap proved to be very beneficial and gave each member of staff a keen view of what it was like to teach in each other school and understand the culture, the young people and each other's pressures and contexts. Again this event was not initially planned but developed from discussion between both schools. There was initial concern as to how this would work but the exchange proved fruitful, helped build relationships between staff and pupil and improved the dynamics of collaboration between the two schools.*

SEP Coordinator School 2

As the extract above demonstrates, such activity was not part of the initial programme design but, as argued by the Coordinator, the way in SEP was managed by Queen's University staff and the school managers, meant that there was room for adaption or 'tweaks.' Staff felt that they could innovate and exercise professional judgement within the project and that it wasn't overly prescriptive. The way in which the project was managed was described as both 'flexible' and 'organic.' Furthermore it was argued that while such an initiative carried with it some concerns or risk, it proved to be both fruitful and inexpensive.

Institutional 'buy in', across the school was according to the Coordinator, essential for the success of the programme. Achieving buy in 'was easy and contact was positive' because the school took time to plan and clearly lay out the aims and the design of the project. The Coordinator recommended this strategy for other schools that are planning to collaborate.

In the same way that institutional buy in was cited as good practice, so too was achieving pupil buy in. The SEP Coordinator at School 2 commented that it was good practice to provide mechanisms and opportunities for students to have a stake in the programme design. It was explained that students played a significant role in determining the themes that were addressed in the project and that much of the content particularly around diversity and inclusion, were as a result of the young people's input. The Coordinator explained: 'we were helping them achieve what they wanted to, in terms of the curriculum.'

The Coordinator also highlighted that schools who are considering collaboration, should bear in mind, based on their experience, that being involved in cross-sector collaboration provides a school with a sense of confidence in knowing that it was able to successfully devise and manage such a project but also it was now equipped with the skills and a successful template in which to demonstrate to other schools and potential funders that it knew how to and was willing to collaborate in the future. This template it was argued was successful because built into it, were opportunities for 'joint planning, joint review' and 'balance in terms of the contact' between both schools.

### 7.3 *School 3*

Travelling and actual face to face contact between pupils was, according to the Coordinator, more logistically challenging than had been anticipated. The Coordinator in School 3 argued that the experience of face to face contact was still 'very strong', beneficial and did impact on pupil development; but it wasn't as yet clear if this type of regular contact (fortnightly) was any better than less frequent contact. It was suggested, in the context of this school, that the same outcomes may be possible with a number of whole day workshops each year, thus reducing travel time and costs but overall maintaining the same amount of contact time at least in hours over the period of the programme. Periods in between workshop days could be supplemented with VLE opportunities between schools. The Coordinator placed value on residentials arguing that they were 'relatively cheap to organise' but had 'quite good outcomes.'

The Coordinator argued that 'there were some tensions with the year group involved because of the pressure of exams' and giving up their time in residentials could have been spent studying. Additionally there was resistance on the part of some subject teachers when students were taken away or off timetable. As a result it was suggested that shared education programmes should not involve students at GCSE level and above. Instead the focus should be at KS3 where there is less exam pressure and more room for flexibility.

#### 7.4 School 4

Parental influence in School 4 was, according to the SEP Coordinator, 'massive' in terms of the success of a shared education programme; especially when schools are situated in contested spaces; gaining parental support, making them more aware of the project objectives and getting them to visit schools more frequently were cited as being important targets to realise:

*From an SEP point of view if you can sort of target the parents then that can be good and beneficial but it is another thing getting them in. The ones you get in you are already preaching to the converted, it's the ones who you can't really get in, they are the difficult ones.*

SEP Coordinator School 4

Examples of good practice, according to the Coordinator, involved setting realistic or modest goals during the initial programme planning phase, then additional programme goals can be advanced at a later stage, especially after relationships have developed between pupils and institutions. In much the same way as suggested by the Coordinator at School 2, building in room for the project to evolve and adapt was important.

Like the Coordinator in School 1, it was suggested that the role of coordinating a shared education programme was time consuming to the point that a member of staff should be appointed to deal with this entirely:

*You would almost need a member of staff dealing with SEP entirely as opposed to a teacher. A teacher has a hell of a lot of work on his plate and that takes priority and that can sort of take away the focus of many of the SEP activities. Either teach or do SEP*

SEP Coordinator School 4

#### 7.5 School 5

This school is situated in contested space and has in the past faced a number of challenges relating to managing sectarianism and parental concerns about the programme's goals. The Coordinator suggested that other cross-sector partnerships in similar contested space situations should prepare to 'run the gauntlet' and expect questions and resistance at times, from parents, the community in general and the



media. In response, both Principals have responded to parents concerns personally and have taken part in a local radio show together, to talk about a sectarian incident in a partner school, as well as inform the local community of the aims of the programme. It was suggested that schools need to develop a sense of resilience and a clear strategy to cope with situations such as these should they occur. Effort should be directed towards gaining the support and involvement of parents representing both sides of the community and building the capacity of teachers throughout schools involved in the programme. The Coordinator suggested that schools should endeavour involve their local community more in shared education programmes, arguing that the community held a broad skills and knowledge base that schools and teachers did not. Harnessing such expertise was another way to develop teacher and pupil capacity, as well as extend the reach of sharing and collaboration beyond the school.

Similar to School 3, the Coordinator in School 5 suggested that there was value in shared learning at Key Stage 3. This was not a criticism of shared learning in other Key Stages but related more to the localised context of the partnership. The coordinator argued that the relationship between schools had reached a point where they felt they could begin to address, through the curriculum, a variety of issues facing young people in the community who were aged between 12 and 15. The Coordinator, who oversaw a post-16 project, proposed that at Key Stage 3, the Learning for Life and Work aspect of the curriculum was aptly placed to address a number of challenges facing pupils in the community. The Coordinator outlined a series of issues affecting young people in the community that the schools served. Issues included: anti-social behaviour, substance abuse, a need for sexual resiliency and helping young people cope with living a contested space. Pitching a shared education project at Key Stage 3 offered more flexibility in the curriculum to address such issues and the age group was ideal in terms of its interventionist potential:

*I think city centre schools are facing huge issues which are not just political anymore; it's very much what we would refer to as the new troubles out there. I keep saying this previously that when you are a society coming out of conflict, you have kept the lid on a whole lot of social issues, that when you lift that lid they come to the fore. I have had to face in this my ninth year more challenging problems on a social, child protection side than I have ever had to before and that is the case of any society coming out of conflict. It is the same set of tools for community relations building your children, building their self esteem, building their confidence and building their resilience. It is the same things we*

*are having to do for the second set of troubles we are having to face. [...] It is hair raising what is going on at the minute with our KS3 students in both schools are faced with huge problems.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Schools who are preparing for cross-collaboration should adopt an honest approach to collaboration and 'not put gloss on it', according to the Coordinator. The experience of trying cross-sectoral collaboration was described as a 'learning curve' and important activity in itself. Programmes need to build into their design, room to adapt and an acceptance that mistakes may be made. In short programmes should avoid being overly prescriptive:

*We have brutally honest throughout the whole SEP experience and with our partners of SEP themselves. So that has been the best way for us to learn, by unpicking it ourselves and going maybe we could have done that differently. [...] I think being allowed to make those mistakes was a valuable part of the experience. [...] The learning curve itself was enough and we were granted that at least. So I have to say that is important that people feel comfortable and trust the process and that is ok to make mistakes as you go along.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

The Coordinator suggested that where possible there should be opportunities to showcase the Sharing Education Programme to principals, teachers and parents both locally and nationally. Additionally, there should, because of a 'moral imperative', be training made available to all Head Teachers on the programme's aims:

*I think what SEP needs to do during the process is get people's hearts as well. The best way to do that was actually manage to get principals seeing the good work that is going on and being very much at the pupil teacher face of what is going on. And for that you need to showcase it to parents and teachers as well, the work that definitely goes on. It will never go on if it simply stays in people's minds. If SEP was to really work I would see every head teacher in Northern Ireland being trained in their tactics and responsibilities and have a moral imperative to face this work head on.*

SEP Coordinator School 5

Similar to other Coordinators, developing institutional relationships was cited as a significant ingredient to the success of SEP. In the early stages of collaboration putting effort into building relationships between management, teachers and governors was key to developing sustainable links beyond the life cycle of the programme.

## 7.6 *Using Best Practice and Logistical Challenges to Create a Model of Collaborative Maturity*

This section has been about trying to extract out messages of best practice and participant's constructive criticism in regards to sharing and school collaboration. In a fashion it provides a type of tool kit for policy makers or educational practitioners who may wish to undertake cross-sector collaboration. Figure 3 below presents a model of progression demonstrating how schools are likely to go through a number of phases towards collaborative maturity. This model is based on summarising the messages of best practice outlined above, but also based on the logistical challenges of cross-sector collaboration outlined in Section 4. The final stage is based on participants' examples of current good practice but also recommendations or aspirations of what could constitute good practice.

There is a wealth of literature available which focuses on identifying the type and the key characteristics of an effective model of collaboration in an educational context, (Atkinson et al. 2007; Woods et al. 2006; Hodgson and Spours, 2006; Higham and Yeomans, 2009; Billet et al. 2007). Strong or effective models of collaboration are often characterised by schools who can articulate clear and strategic vision (Woods et al. 2006); where schools collaborate because of shared concerns based around a localised context (Higham and Yeomans, 2009); when the practice of collaboration penetrates deeply throughout a school; when there is strong and supportive leadership (Atkinson et al. 2007) and where there are appropriate mechanisms or opportunities for schools to build trust and trustworthiness with one another (Billet et al. 2007)

For the most part, the collaborative practice in this study has become complex and multi-dimensional. Billet et al. 2007 argue that the context and motivation for schools to collaborate is often different and usually entangled with economic, social and political imperatives. In some cases schools may wish to respond from the bottom-up, to their own community needs, as demonstrated by School 5; or because they are involved in or enact government, civic or aid agencies agendas and other cases collaborative models reflect a hybrid of both, which Billet et al. (2007) refer to as a negotiated partnerships, which are partnerships which negotiate between the needs of a community and the auspices of a say a government agency or a funding or

managing body such as the Sharing Education Programme. The motivations for SEP1 schools to sustain partnership reflect these types of partnership arrangements. Participants in this study described being motivated to collaborate for a variety of reasons including: broadening and improving curricular choice for pupils; school and departmental development; being able to avail of additional funding; wanting to be involved or enact national initiative and wanting to work with and sustain partnership because of the personal and professional development opportunities. The motivations of the schools involved in this study amount to more than what Atkinson et al. (2007) refer to as culturally based collaborations. Schools may have been initially motivated by the opportunities to establish partnership across the sectors, to share resources and improve community relations but a number of them have articulated that partnership has deepened as has the desire to sustain it.

Schools whose models of collaboration best reflect Stage 3 are likely to be more robust and as a consequence are the schools most likely to sustain collaboration. Stage 3 demonstrates instances where there is collaborative evolution; where schools begin to innovate and develop new practice and look for means to sustain partnership. This phase represents a shift away from defining collaboration solely by the shared activities in classrooms and becomes more about how schools have developed institutional relationships. It is here where schools are most likely to sustain partnership after the funding cycle. The third stage also demonstrates how schools in partnership develop stronger ties to the communities. Crucially Stage 3 partnerships have longevity and have amassed experience collaborating. This is important in the context of Northern Ireland where the practice of sharing and collaboration particularly cross-sector remains a relatively new phenomenon. Schools involved in SEP1 are in effect paving the way for other schools. As a consequence schools are learning to collaborate and as a result, schools whose models of collaboration best reflect Stage 3 are those that recognise where they have made mistakes or faced logistical difficulties but crucially they have also developed coping strategies.

All the schools involved in this study, based on the perspectives of Coordinators, demonstrated either many or some of the qualities of Stage 3. All of the schools operated between stages 2 and 3.

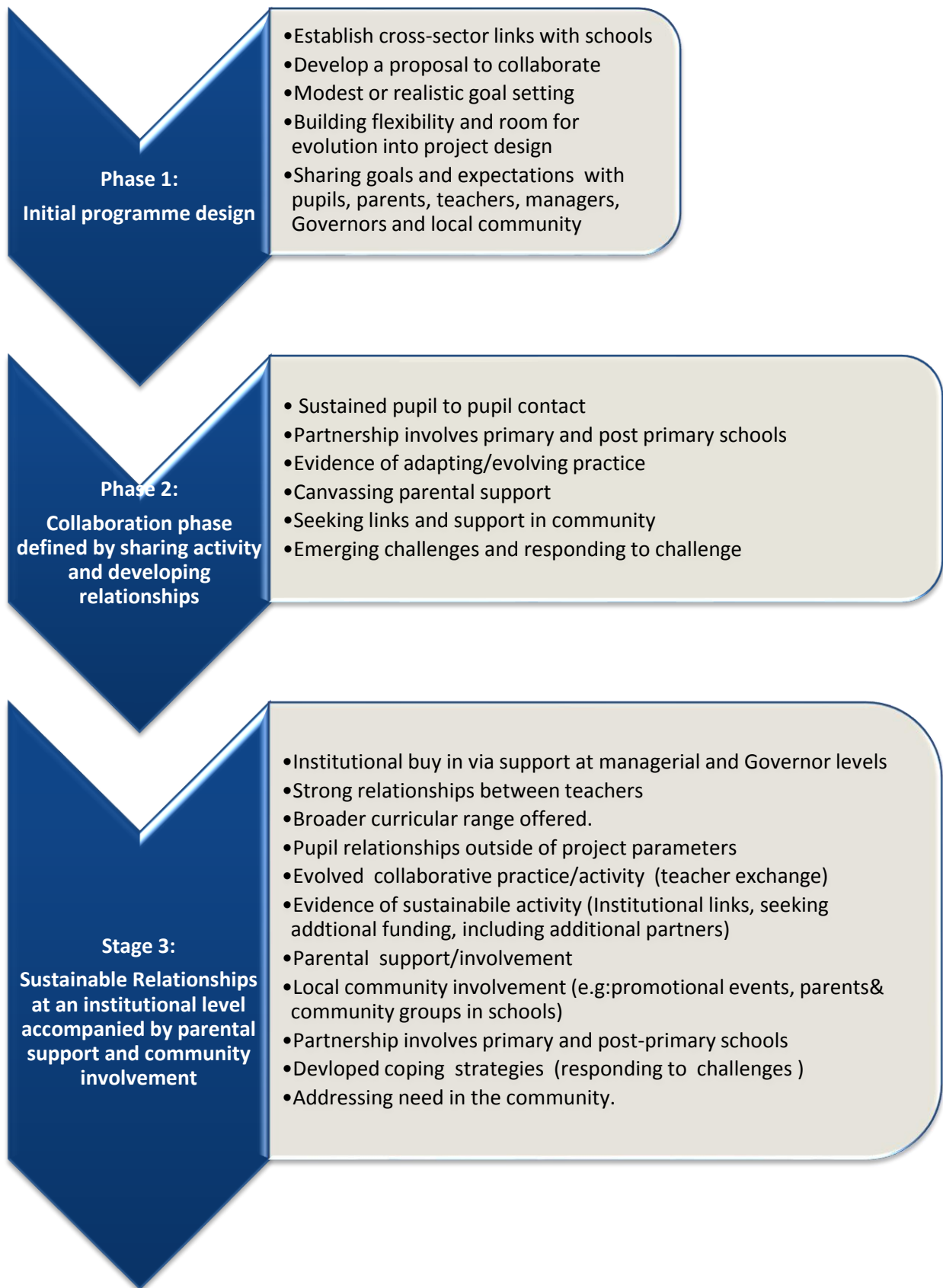


Figure 3: A progressive model toward collaborative maturity

## Section 8: Conclusions

The core aim of this study has been to examine the extent to which schools continued to collaborate after being involved in the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme (2007-2010). Subsidiary aims have included: asking schools about the challenges they faced during cross-sector collaboration; identifying the range of benefits to emerge from partnership and extracting out key messages of good practice that can be used to temper the logistical challenges that come with collaboration. The study is small scale, but provides useful case study insights into the experience of collaboration the challenges and value schools ascribed to it and the extent to which they sought to sustain it. Not addressed in this study are the viewpoints of teachers and students involved in shared learning.

### 8.1 Sustainable Collaboration

The evidence presented here would indicate that most of the schools have, to varying degrees, sustained collaboration with their partner schools beyond the first cohort of the Sharing Education Programme. Knox (2010 p55) argued that ‘the delivery of SEP was very resource dependent’, this still applies and in the same vein, the Coordinator at School 1 argued that a lack of funding impacts on the quality and quantity of collaborative activity between pupils and institutions. The current model relies on funds to: sustain movement of pupils between schools; maintain regular face to face contact; the buy in of teachers’ time, venue hire and the involvement of outside/community agencies. However a key point in this study is that the idea of sustainability should not be entirely couched around the idea of funding. Sustainability is also about creating the right conditions between schools where collaboration penetrates throughout the schools involved, that after the funding cycle has ceased, schools continue to work together because they value the institutional relationships that have formed. Encouragingly, all of the schools indicated a willingness to continue to collaborate. Collaborative activity in three of the schools still involved some pupil to pupil contact and strong institutional links after SEP1 funding. In two of these cases schools clearly valued partnership working and sought funding from other sources to sustain collaboration. One of the schools maintained

pupil to pupil contact from its own funds but could do this because it had no transport costs.

## 8.2 Benefits Outweigh Challenges

Arguably, the benefits of collaboration outweigh the challenges. The challenges cited most, remain consistent with those identified in previous studies namely: the logistics of timetabling and transport. However a number of schools were keen to highlight that challenges such as these were more likely to impact, in the early stages of school collaboration and schools given time and preparation adjusted. Also cited in this study were the challenges schools and pupils faced adjusting to each others' ethos and cultural practice. However it is here that the positive impacts of the project become evident. Section 6 identifies a series of benefits to emerge from cross-sector collaboration. Clearly there are community relations benefits in terms of sustained exposure to different religious, cultural and political practice. Pupils from different backgrounds have opportunities to learn together and in all cases explicitly explore themes of difference, commonality, reconciliation and the legacy of conflict. Alongside community relations, Coordinators were also keen to point out that collaboration exposed pupils and schools to other differences in terms of socio-economics, gender; schools located in rural and urban settings and differences between grammar and secondary contexts. Pupils benefit from collaboration in terms of: developing new skills, making new friends, growing in confidence, being able to access a broader curriculum and learning about difference and diverse cultural practice. Schools also benefit in terms of teachers' professional development, sustained relationships, being able to offer broader curricular choices, institutional confidence and the positive publicity ('kudos') that comes from being involved in a national sharing education initiative

## 8.3 Messages of Best Practice

Schools valued that the SEP model was not overly prescriptive, in the sense that there was room for Coordinators to exercise professional judgement, be creative and make adjustments or 'tweaks' to the project where necessary; there needed to be room to make mistakes. A number of Coordinators described needing some room for

the project to evolve and be organic. As a consequence collaborative models need to reflect the particular context of the schools involved. Each of the models in this study differed to some degree; take for example the teacher swap in School 2.

Coordinators pointed out that a good model of collaboration should make allowances and prepare for the impact that such an endeavour has on teachers involved. Teachers may be dealing with legacy of the conflict themselves and may need support and time to adjust to the idea of teaching in schools with different ethos or cultural/religious practice.

Some of the schools talked about cross-sector collaboration needing parental support and involvement. Those schools situated in contested space appeared to experience the most resistance from parents; perhaps due to concerns about safety moving through contested space or their children mixing with young people from the other side of the community. According to some Coordinators, parents were also dealing with the legacy of the conflict themselves. Others that had more parental support and involvement valued this as an important aspect of their programme. In some cases Coordinators suggested that schools need to build bridges between themselves and the communities in which they operate. In doing so, schools should better inform and involve communities more, as well draw upon knowledge and skill sets within the community to augment programmes.

The collaborative partnerships in this study are complex and multi-dimensional. They are much more than culturally-based (Atkinson et al, 2007) collaborations. This is because partnerships are principally about cross-sector schools engaging with one another via the curriculum and broadening curricular choice, but also about sharing expertise, improving schools and even addressing community need. Reconciliation outcomes remain important and explicit elements of the Sharing Education Programme but not the only defining outcomes.



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